

The National Security Archive

[home](#) | [about](#) | [documents](#) | [news](#) | [postings](#) | [FOIA](#) | [research](#) | [internships](#) | [search](#) | [donate](#) | [mailing_list](#)



JFK and the Diem Coup

by John Prados

National Security Archive
Electronic Briefing Book
No. 101

Posted - November 5,
2003



[Print this page](#)

Join the Archive's
Electronic Mailing List

[Electronic Briefing
Books Main Index](#)

5 November 2003

Formore information:
John Prados 301/565-0564

**JFK TAPE DETAILS HIGH-LEVEL
VIETNAM COUP PLOTTING IN 1963;**

**DOCUMENTS SHOW NO THOUGHT
OF DIEM ASSASSINATION;**

**U.S. OVERESTIMATED INFLUENCE
ON SAIGON GENERALS.**

Washington D.C., November 5, 2003 - [A White House tape of President Kennedy and his advisers](#), published this week in a new book-and-CD collection and

excerpted on the Web, confirms that top U.S. officials sought the November 1, 1963 coup against then-South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem without apparently considering the physical consequences for Diem personally (he was murdered the following day). The taped meeting and [related documents](#) show that U.S. officials, including JFK, vastly overestimated their ability to control the South Vietnamese generals who ran the coup 40 years ago this week.

The Kennedy tape from October 29, 1963 captures the highest-level White House meeting immediately prior to the coup, including the President's brother voicing doubts about the policy of support for a coup: "I mean, it's different from a coup in the Iraq or South American country; we are so intimately involved in this...." National Security Archive senior fellow John Prados provides a full transcript of the meeting, together with the audio on CD, in his new book-and-CD publication, *The White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President* (New York: The New Press, 2003, 331 pp. + 8 CDs, ISBN 1-56584-852-7), just published this week and featuring audio files from 8 presidents, from Roosevelt to Reagan.

To mark the 40th anniversary of the Diem coup, a critical turning point in the Vietnam war, Dr. Prados also compiled and annotated for the Web a selection of recently declassified documents from the forthcoming documentary publication, *U.S. Policy in the Vietnam War*, to be published in spring 2004 by the National Security Archive and ProQuest Information and Learning. Together with the Kennedy tape from October 29, 1963, the documents show that American leaders discussed not only whether to support a successor government, but also the distribution of pro- and anti-coup forces, U.S. actions that could be taken that would contribute to a coup, and calling off a coup if its prospects were not good.

"Supporting the Diem coup made the U.S. responsible for the outcome in South Vietnam in exactly the way

Bobby Kennedy feared on October 29," said Dr. Prados. "Ironically, though, as the conversation continued, he and the other doubters abandoned these larger considerations and concentrated only on whether a coup would succeed - nothing else mattered."

The posting today also includes the transcript of Diem's last phone call to U.S. ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, inquiring "what the attitude of the U.S. is" towards the coup then underway; Lodge dissembled that he was not "well enough informed at this time to be able to tell you."

JFK and the Diem Coup

by John Prados

By 1963, about mid-way through America's involvement in the wars of Vietnam, the policymakers of the Kennedy administration felt trapped between the horns of a dilemma. South Vietnam, the part of the former state of Vietnam which the United States supported, remained in the throes of a civil war between the anti-communist government the U.S. favored and communist guerrillas backed by North Vietnam. Government forces could not seem to get a handle on how to cope with the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, as the communist movement was known. American military and intelligence agencies disputed progress in the war. While denying journalists' observations that the United States was slipping into a quagmire in Vietnam, the Kennedy administration was privately well aware of the problems in the war and tried measures of all kinds to energize the South Vietnamese effort.

One big problem was in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, with the South Vietnamese government itself. Plagued by corruption, political intrigues, and constant internal squabbling, the South Vietnamese were often at loggerheads. With the Americans, whose interest lay in combating the National Liberation Front guerrillas, the South Vietnamese promised cooperation but often delivered very little. There were other difficulties rooted

in the way the South Vietnamese government had been created originally, and the way the U.S. had helped organize the South Vietnamese army in the 1950s, but these factors would not be directly relevant to the events of 1963. ([Note 1](#)).



The
Saigon

government was headed by President Ngo Dinh Diem, an autocratic, nepotistic ruler who valued power more than either his relations with the Vietnamese people or progress in fighting the communists. Diem had originally come to power by legal means, appointed prime minister of the government that had existed in 1954, and he had then consolidated power through a series of military coups, quasi-coups, a government reorganization, a referendum on his leadership, and finally a couple of staged presidential elections. Diem styled South Vietnam a republic and held the title president, but he had banned political parties other than his own and he refused to permit a legal opposition. From 1954 onwards the Americans had been urging political reforms upon Diem, who repeatedly promised that reforms would be made but never enacted any.

The autocratic style of Diem's leadership was not lost upon the South Vietnamese, who were less and less enamored of the Saigon leader. A major military coup against Diem had occurred in November 1960, which he had survived only due to divisions among the military leadership. Diem exploited these to play factions off against each other and thus secure his own political survival. In February 1962 disgruntled air force pilots

had bombed the presidential palace in hopes of killing Diem and forcing new leadership, but that too did not work, as Diem at that moment had been in a different part of the palace to the one that was attacked. Diem reassigned military officers to improve his security but again neglected to undertake political reforms. ([Note 2](#))

The Kennedy administration between 1961 and 1963 repeatedly increased the levels of its military aid to Saigon, funding growth in the Vietnamese armed forces. The U.S. military, and American military intelligence, focused on the improvements in the ratio of troop strength between the government and guerrillas that followed from force increases and argued the war was successful. Diplomats and aid officials were more pessimistic. The CIA, ordered to make an intelligence assessment in the spring of 1963, permitted their view to be swayed by the military and produced a national intelligence estimate that downplayed Diem's political weaknesses. President Kennedy heard warnings from his State Department officials and a rosy picture from the military, and felt reassured by the CIA estimate. ([Note 3](#))

White House impressions were shattered beginning on May 8, when South Vietnamese security forces acting under the orders of one of Ngo Dinh Diem's brothers, fired into a crowd of Buddhist religious marchers celebrating the Buddha's 2,527th birthday. The rationale for the breakup of this march was no more serious than that the Buddhists had ignored a government edict against flying flags other than the South Vietnamese state flag. Another of Diem's brothers, the Roman Catholic archbishop for this same area of South Vietnam had flown flags with impunity just weeks before when celebrating his own promotion within the Church; the Buddhists may have been encouraged by that act to think their own actions would be permitted as well. Suppression of this Buddhist march in the ancient Vietnamese imperial capital of Hue led to a political crisis, the "Buddhist crisis," that ignited Saigon throughout the summer and fall of 1963. ([Note 4](#))

The two brothers of Diem implicated in the Hue suppression were not even the Saigon leader's main problem. Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu sat in the presidential palace as private counselor, manipulator, emissary, and puppetmaster of the Saigon government. Even more than Diem himself Nhu was regarded widely in South Vietnam as a menace, directing Diem's political party, some of his intelligence services, and Special Forces created under one of the American-sponsored aid programs. Nhu took a very negative view of the Buddhist troubles. President Diem's response to the Buddhist crisis, once he passed beyond denying that anything was happening, was to promise political and religious reforms, and negotiations for a modus vivendi with the Buddhists were carried out in Saigon. Nhu, however, encouraged the South Vietnamese leader to renege on the agreement and, once again, Diem failed to enact any of the political concessions that had been agreed.

Buddhist religious demonstrations came to Saigon in late May and soon became almost daily events. On June 11 the protests attained a new level of intensity after a bonze publicly immolated himself at a busy Saigon street intersection as the climax of a demonstration.

Photographs of the scene startled the world, and made the Buddhist troubles a political issue in the United States for President Kennedy, who faced a tough problem in continuing economic and military aid to a government so clearly violating the human rights of its people. The CIA put out an addendum to its previous national intelligence estimate revising its assessment of Diem's political prospects, and State Department intelligence circulated a report predicting major trouble in Saigon. ([Note 5](#)).

President Diem's worsening situation led him to declare martial law in August 1963, and on August 21 Ngo Dinh Nhu used the martial law authority to carry out major raids on the largest pagodas of the Buddhist group behind the protests. Nhu conducted the raids in such a way as to suggest that South Vietnamese military commanders were behind them, and used troops funded by the United States through the CIA to carry out the raids. Within days

of the raids, South Vietnamese military officers were approaching Americans to inquire as to what the U.S. response might be to a military coup in Saigon. ([Note 6](#)).

This situation forms the background to the selection of documents included in this briefing book. The documents frame those meetings and major instructions in which President Kennedy was directly involved in considerations of a coup in Saigon. There were two main periods during which these deliberations took place, August and October 1963. The first sequence followed quickly on the pagoda raids, the second occurred once the South Vietnamese generals initiated a new round of coup preparations. The documents here consist primarily of records of meetings or key cabled instructions or reports pertinent to the coup, which would eventually take place on November 1, 1963. ([Note 7](#)).

There were two major episodes where the American involvement in these Vietnamese political events would be the most intense, although the U.S. remained heavily engaged in Vietnam throughout. We have for the most part selected documents that reflect high level action by the United States government-meetings with President Kennedy and his chief lieutenants. Our document selections reflect these intense sequences, but they are drawn from a much larger set of materials in the National Security Archive's U.S. Policy in the Vietnam War, Part I: 1954-1968. The first period of intense activity occurred in August 1963, when South Vietnamese military officers initially planned to secure American support for their coup against Ngo Dinh Diem. This period included an incident that became very well-known in U.S. government circles, in which State Department official Roger Hilsman originated a cable giving the South Vietnamese generals the green light for a coup against Diem ([Document 2](#)). Much of the succeeding U.S. activity revolved upon making it seem that policy had been rescinded without in fact changing it. The second high point came in October 1963, when final preparations were made for the coup that was carried out.

In the wake of the coup against Diem and the assassination of the Saigon leader and his brother, many observers have wrestled with the question of President Kennedy's involvement in the murders. In 1975 the Church Committee investigating CIA assassination programs investigated the Diem coup as one of its cases. [\(Note 8\)](#) Kennedy loyalists and administration



participants have argued that the President had nothing to do with the murders, while some have charged Kennedy with, in effect, conspiring to kill Diem. When the coup did begin the security precautions taken by the South Vietnamese generals included giving the U.S. embassy only four minutes warning, and then cutting off telephone service to the American military advisory group.

Washington's information was partial as a result, and continued so through November 2, the day Diem died. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recounts that Kennedy was meeting with his senior advisers about Vietnam on the morning of November 2 (see [Document 25](#)) when NSC staff aide Michael V. Forrestal entered the Cabinet Room holding a cable ([Document 24](#) provides the same information) reporting the death. [\(Note 9\)](#) Both McNamara and historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a participant as White House historian, record that President Kennedy blanched at the news and was shocked at the murder of Diem. [\(Note 10\)](#) Historian Howard Jones notes that CIA director John McCone and his subordinates were amazed that Kennedy should be shocked at the deaths, given how unpredictable were coups d'etat. [\(Note 11\)](#)

Records of the Kennedy national security meetings, both here and in our larger collection, show that none of JFK's conversations about a coup in Saigon featured consideration of what might physically happen to Ngo Dinh Diem or Ngo Dinh Nhu. The [audio record of the October 29th meeting](#) which we cite below also reveals no discussion of this issue. That meeting, the last held at the White House to consider a coup before this actually took place, would have been the key moment for such a conversation. The conclusion of the Church Committee agrees that Washington gave no consideration to killing Diem. ([Note 12](#)) The weight of evidence therefore supports the view that President Kennedy did not conspire in the death of Diem. However, there is also the exceedingly strange transcript of Diem's final phone conversation with Ambassador Lodge on the afternoon of the coup ([Document 23](#)), which carries the distinct impression that Diem is being abandoned by the U.S. Whether this represents Lodge's contribution, or JFK's wishes, is not apparent from the evidence available today.

A second charge has to do with Kennedy administration denials that it had had anything to do with the coup itself. The documentary record is replete with evidence that President Kennedy and his advisers, both individually and collectively, had a considerable role in the coup overall, by giving initial support to Saigon military officers uncertain what the U.S. response might be, by withdrawing U.S. aid from Diem himself, and by publicly pressuring the Saigon government in a way that made clear to South Vietnamese that Diem was isolated from his American ally. In addition, at several of his meetings (Documents [7](#), [19](#), [22](#)) Kennedy had CIA briefings and led discussions based on the estimated balance between pro- and anti-coup forces in Saigon that leave no doubt the United States had a detailed interest in the outcome of a coup against Ngo Dinh Diem. The CIA also provided \$42,000 in immediate support money to the plotters the morning of the coup, carried by Lucien Conein, an act prefigured in administration planning ([Document 17](#)).

The ultimate effect of United States participation in the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem was to commit Washington to Saigon even more deeply. Having had a hand in the coup America had more responsibility for the South Vietnamese governments that followed Diem. That these military juntas were ineffectual in prosecuting the Vietnam war then required successively greater levels of involvement from the American side. The weakness of the Saigon government thus became a factor in U.S. escalations of the Vietnam war, leading to the major ground war that the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson opened in 1965.

Note: The following documents are in PDF format. You will need to download and install the free [Adobe Acrobat Reader](#) to view.

Documents

DOCUMENT 1

DCI Briefing, July 9, 1963

SOURCE: John F. Kennedy Library: John F. Kennedy Papers (Hereafter JFKL: JFKP): National Security File: Country File, box 51, folder: Cuba: Subjects, Intelligence Material.

This document shows that Director of Central Intelligence John A. McCone briefed President Kennedy within twenty-four hours after a South Vietnamese general first approached CIA officer Lucien Conein. At the time multiple different plots were anticipated, at least one of which might become active the following day (the Tuyen plot referred to aborted, Tran Kim Tuyen was sent out of the country as ambassador to Egypt). The CIA also here recognizes the political significance of the Buddhist issue in South Vietnam.

DOCUMENT 2

State-Saigon Cable 243, August 24, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Meetings & Memoranda series, box 316, folder: Meetings on

Vietnam 8/24/63-8/31/63

This is the notorious "Hilsman Cable," drafted by Assistant Secretary of state For Far Eastern Affairs Roger A. Hilsman in response to a repeated contact between General Don and Conein on August 23. The U.S. government position generally supported action to unseat Ngo Dinh Nhu and if Diem's departure were necessary to reach that goal, so be it. Hilsman's stronger formulation of that position in this cable was drafted while President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and CIA director McCone were all out of town. Though the cable had the proper concurrences by their deputies or staff, the principals were converted by officials who opposed the Hilsman pro-coup policy. Much of the rest of August 1963 was taken up by the U.S. government trying to take back the coup support expressed in this cable while, out of concern for the U.S. image with the South Vietnamese generals, without seeming to do so.

DOCUMENT 3

Memorandum of Conversation, "*Vietnam*," August 26, 1963, Noon

SOURCE: JFKL: Roger Hilsman Papers, Country Series, box 4, folder: Vietnam: White House Meetings 8/26/63-8/29/63, State Memcons

The first of a series of records of meetings in which President John F. Kennedy and his lieutenants consider the implications of a coup and the difficulties of bringing off a successful one.

DOCUMENT 4

Memorandum for the President, August 27, 1963

SOURCE; JFKL: John Newman Papers, Notebook, August 24-31, 1963.

National Security Council staffer Michael V. Forrestal sends a memo to President Kennedy advising on what he may expect to hear at the meeting on Vietnam policy

scheduled for that afternoon.

DOCUMENT 5

Memorandum of Conversation, "*Vietnam*," August 27, 1963, 4:00PM

SOURCE: JFKL: Roger Hilsman Papers, Country Series, box 4, folder: Vietnam: White House Meetings 8/26/63-8/29/63, State Memcons

President Kennedy continues his consideration of a policy of support for a coup in Saigon, this time with the participation of recently-returned ambassador to Saigon Frederick C. Nolting. The former ambassador opposes any coup in Saigon but frankly admits that the prospects for a coup depend upon the U.S. attitude. Secretary Rusk argues that Nolting's recommendations are inadequate. Kennedy orders Assistant Secretary Hilsman to prepare a study of the contingency options. This is the State Department record of the meeting.

DOCUMENT 6

Memorandum of Conference with the President, August 27, 1963, 4:00 PM

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File, Meetings & Memoranda series, box 316, folder: Meetings on Vietnam 8/24/63-8/31/63

A different record of the same Vietnam policy meeting, one compiled by the National Security Council (NSC) staff, reports more fully on comments by CIA's William Colby, Secretary McNamara, Roger Hilsman, McGeorge Bundy and others.

DOCUMENT 7

Memorandum of Conversation, "*Vietnam*," August 28, 1963, Noon

SOURCE: JFKL: Roger Hilsman Papers, Country Series, box 4, folder: Vietnam: White House Meetings 8/26/63-8/29/63, State Department Memcons

State Department record of the meeting on Vietnam

policy, notes continued opposition by former ambassador Nolting, interventions by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, Deputy Secretary of State W. Averell Harriman, Secretary of the Treasury C. Douglas Dillon, and others. There is discussion of the status of coup forces as well as U.S. military moves. The meeting ends with an understanding the White House will re-establish a policy-making body along the lines of the "Executive Committee" created during the Cuban Missile Crisis and that it shall meet daily. (Another, NSC staff, record of this meeting with additional detail is available in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, v.4, pp. 1-9, ed. John P. Glennon, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991.) The importance of the Vietnam issue is further highlighted by the fact that President Kennedy is taking the time to hold two of these policy sessions on the same day as the massive March on Washington for civil rights by African-Americans and others.

DOCUMENT 8

Central Intelligence Agency, *Current Intelligence Memorandum (OCI 2703/63)*, "Cast of Characters in South Vietnam," August 28, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 201, folder: Vietnam: General, CIA Reports 11/3/63-11/5/63 [An August document filed with November materials]

The front page of this intelligence memorandum contains notes by McGeorge Bundy on his impressions of the discussion at the White House meeting that day at noon. The memorandum itself is a useful rundown on the various South Vietnamese persons involved in the coup plots and counterplots.

DOCUMENT 9

Memorandum of Conversation, "Vietnam," August 28, 1963, 6:00 PM

SOURCE: JFKL: John Newman Papers, Notebook, August 1963

In a brief meeting following President Kennedy's encounter with the civil rights leaders who had led the March on Washington (see the recording of that meeting and its transcript, available in John Prados, ed. *The White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President*. New York: The New Press, 2003, pp. 69-92 and Disc 2), the President declares that a series of personal messages from him to U.S. officials in Saigon will be designed to elicit their views on a coup and a general cable will furnish fresh directives.

DOCUMENT 10

Memorandum of Conference with the President, August 29, 1963, 1200 Noon

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Meetings & Memoranda series, box 316, folder: Meetings on Vietnam, 8/24/63-8/31/63

Policy review of the latest issues in the coup plotting in South Vietnam, where President Kennedy asks for disagreements with the course of action the U.S. is following. Secretary McNamara recommends the U.S. disassociate itself from the South Vietnamese military's coup plans, with some support from other officials, particularly Ambassador Nolting. All agree that Diem will have to get rid of Nhu, however. The President is told that American official Rufus D. Phillips, a former CIA officer, has been ordered to inform the South Vietnamese generals that Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge is behind the contacts which CIA officers are having with them. Kennedy issues instructions, then breaks up for a smaller meeting in the Oval Office.

DOCUMENT 11

Memorandum of Conversation, "*Vietnam*," August 29, 1963, 12:00 Noon

SOURCE: JFKL: Roger Hilsman Papers: Country Series, box 4, folder: Vietnam: White House Meetings 8/26/63-8/29/63, State Department Memcons

President Kennedy explores the possibility of "an

approach to Diem" on reforms and getting rid of Ngo Dinh Nhu. However, Secretary Rusk reports that both the U.S. ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, and the military advisory group leader, General Paul D. Harkins, are on record agreeing that the war cannot be won with a Diem-Nhu combination at the head of the Saigon government. This is a different version of the meeting described in Document 10.

DOCUMENT 12

State-Saigon Cable 272, August 29, 1963

SORUCE: Lyndon B. Johnson Library: Lyndon B. Johnson Papers: National Security File: Country File Vietnam Addendum, box 263 (temporary), folder: Hilsman, Roger (Diem)

These are the instructions adopted by President Kennedy at the White House meetings on this date. They are carefully drawn to associate the United States with moves to oust Ngo Dinh Nhu from the South Vietnamese government, notes that "a last approach to Diem remains undecided," and that the U.S. will not engage in joint coup planning though it will support a coup "that has a good chance of succeeding."

DOCUMENT 13

National Security Council Staff-State Department Draft, Michael Forrestal and Roger Hilsman, *"Suggested Draft of Presidential Letter Adapted to Phase I of the Plan,"* September 12, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: Roger Hilsman Papers, Country File, box 4, folder: Vietnam, September 11-20, 1963 (2)

President Kennedy's instructions in late August to Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman led to a two-phase plan to put pressure on Diem for reforms and to dispense with his brother Nhu. Hilsman prepared such a plan, which included evacuation of Americans and terminating aid parts of the South Vietnamese military. This plan was at the center of U.S. discussions throughout much of September, but in the

middle of it Kennedy privately had Hilsman prepare a letter to Diem with the help of Michael Forrestal of the NSC staff designed to ask Diem to make reforms, while simultaneously reassuring the Saigon leader and warning him that the U.S. would take actions (according to the Hilsman pressure plan) "which make it clear that American cooperation and American assistance will not be given to or through individuals whose acts and words seem to run against the purpose of genuine national reconciliation and unified national effort." This was a reference to Ngo Dinh Nhu. The annotations in this draft are Roger Hilsman's.

DOCUMENT 14

State Department-National Security Council Staff Draft, Roger Hilsman-Michael Forrestal, Potential Kennedy-Diem Letter, September 12, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Meetings & Memoranda, box 316, folder: Meetings on Vietnam, September 11-12, 1963

This is a clean copy of the final draft of the letter included as Document 13. President Kennedy brought up the letter at a national security meeting in the evening of September 11, asking if one had been prepared as he had previously suggested. National security adviser McGeorge Bundy tried to dissuade Kennedy from the letter idea. The letter was prepared, however, but ultimately rejected as too awkward and indirect (trying to get rid of Nhu without mentioning him by name, for example). Instead President Kennedy decided to send Robert McNamara and General Maxwell D. Taylor on a survey trip to South Vietnam, where they could speak to Diem privately, as well as evaluate prospects for a coup on the ground. That trip took place at the end of September. Diem proved unresponsive. Kennedy turned back to his pressure program.

DOCUMENT 15

Central Intelligence Agency, Untitled Draft, October 8, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: President's Office File, Departments and Agencies series, box 72, folder: CIA, 1963.

Ngo Dinh Nhu struck back at his American enemies by using newspapers he controlled in Saigon to reveal the name of the CIA station chief in Saigon, John Richardson, claim there were divisions between Ambassador Lodge and the CIA station, and that the CIA was responsible for adverse developments in South Vietnam since the Pagoda Raids of August. Much of this was then picked up and reported in the press in the United States. John Kennedy had scheduled a press conference for October 9 and in this briefing note the CIA tried to prepare him for questions that might be asked. Kennedy was indeed asked about the CIA in Saigon at that news conference, and he replied, "I can find nothing . . . to indicate that the CIA has done anything but support policy. It does not create policy, it attempts to execute it in those areas where it has competence and responsibility." The president described John Richardson as "a very dedicated public servant." Clearly JFK kept very close to his CIA briefing note.

DOCUMENT 16

Department of State, *"Successor Heads of Government,"* October 25, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: Roger Hilsman Papers, Country File, box 4, folder: Vietnam, 10/6/63-10/31/63

Joseph A. Mendenhall, of the Far East Bureau of the State Department, who had recently completed a survey mission to South Vietnam at President Kennedy's request, supplies a list of possible Vietnamese figures to head a successor government in Saigon. Note that the list assumes a civilian government and includes none of the military men who eventually constituted the junta that replaced Diem.

DOCUMENT 17

Department of State, *"Check-List of Possible U.S. Actions in Case of Coup,"* October 25, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: Roger Hilsman Papers, Country File, box 4, folder: Vietnam 10/6/63-10/31/63

Mendenhall also compiles a set of options the Kennedy administration can take in support of a coup aimed at the Diem government. Note that he mentions providing money or other "inducements" to Vietnamese to join in the plot. The CIA would actually provide \$42,000 to the coup plotters during the coup itself (other amounts in support are not known).

DOCUMENT 18

National Security Council Staff, *"Check List for 4 PM Meeting,"* no date [October 29, 1963]

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 201, folder: Vietnam, General, Memos & Miscellaneous, 10/15/63-10/28/63

National security adviser McGeorge Bundy supplies an agenda for the last meeting President Kennedy held with his top officials prior to the actual coup in Saigon. Bundy suggests opening with an intelligence briefing on the array of opposing forces, proceeding to a discussion of whether Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge should make an expected trip home for consultations, and ending contingency planning for a coup.

AUDIO CLIP

President Kennedy Meets with His National Security Council on the Question of Supporting a Coup in South Vietnam (10 minutes 55 seconds) From John Prados, ed. *The White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President* (New York: The New Press, 2003, 331 pp. + 8 CDs, ISBN 1-56584-852-7)

(See Document 19 below for the official NSC staff record of this meeting)

[NOTE: This audio clip is a Windows Media Audio file (.wma) and should be opened using Windows Media Player]

DOCUMENT 19

Memorandum of Conference with the President, October

29, 1963, 4:20 PM

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File, Meetings & Memoranda series, box 317, folder: Meetings on Vietnam, 10/29/63

The NSC staff record of the discussion at the meeting that followed from Bundy's agenda. American leaders suddenly exhibit cold feet, starting with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy who, as he had done during the Cuban Missile Crisis, warns against precipitate action. Bobby Kennedy was seconded by Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Maxwell D. Taylor and CIA director John McCone. Other doubts are also expressed. The group also considered a cable of instructions to Ambassador Lodge. (The recording and a transcript of the discussion at this key meeting is available in John Prados, ed. *The White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President*, op. cit., pp. 97-140 and Disc 3.)

DOCUMENT 20

Draft Cable, *Eyes Only for Ambassador Saigon*, October 29, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 204, folder: Vietnam: Subjects: Top Secret Cables (Tab C) 10/28/63-10/31/63

This document is the NSC staff's draft of a cable to Ambassador Lodge which is discussed at the meeting recorded in Document 18. It contains instructions for the ambassador's travel as well as arrangements for operating the embassy in a coup situation, and material on Washington's attitude toward the coup.

DOCUMENT 21

Draft Cable, *Eyes Only for Ambassador Lodge* [CIA cable 79407, noted in upper right hand corner], October 30, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 201, folder: Vietnam, General: State & Defense Cables, 10/29/63-10/31/63

McGeorge Bundy answers a cable from Ambassador Lodge with additional commentary flowing from President Kennedy's meeting on October 29. Note Washington's presumption that "We do not accept . . . that we have no power to delay or discourage a coup." The discussion at the meeting and in the previous cable and this one clearly indicate the Kennedy White House miscalculated its ability to influence the South Vietnamese generals and their plans.

DOCUMENT 22

Memorandum of Conference with the President,
November 1, 1963, 10:00 AM

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File, Meetings & Memoranda series, box 317, folder: Meetings on Vietnam 11/1/63-11/2/63

President Kennedy meets with his national security team even as the South Vietnamese generals in Saigon are activating forces for their coup. Kennedy is briefed on coup forces and on the progress of the coup thus far, which appears to be (and is) going against President Diem. Secretary Rusk and CIA director McCone advise on relevant matters for U.S. action and Secretary McNamara comments on public relations aspects of the situation.

DOCUMENT 23

Department of State, John M. Dunn, *Memorandum for the Record*, November 1, 1963

SOURCE: Gerald R. Ford Library: Gerald R. Ford Papers: National Security Adviser's Files: NSC Convenience File, box 6, folder: Henry Cabot Lodge, inc. Diem (2)

This document records President Ngo Dinh Diem's last conversation on the telephone with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. Diem asks what is the attitude of the United States toward the coup plot and Lodge replies, disingenuously, that he does not feel well-enough

informed to say what the U.S. position actually is.

DOCUMENT 24

Central Intelligence Agency, *"The Situation in South Vietnam,"* November 2, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: President's Office File, box 128A, folder: Vietnam: Security, 1963

The CIA reports the fall of Diem and the success of the generals' coup. The report notes that Diem and Nhu are dead, by suicide as announced on the radio.

DOCUMENT 25

Memorandum of Conference with the President,
November 2, 1963, 9:15 AM

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Meetings & Memoranda series, box 317, folder: Meetings on Vietnam 11/1/63-11/2/63

This is the NSC staff record of the initial high level meeting held by President Kennedy in the wake of the Saigon coup. It was during this meeting that NSC staffer Michael Forrestal entered the room with news of Diem's death. Kennedy and his advisers confront the necessity of making public comment on the death of Ngo Dinh Diem and consider the implications for the United States.

DOCUMENT 26

Embassy Saigon, Cable 888, November 2, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 201, folder: Vietnam: General, State Cables, 11/1/63-11/2/63

The Embassy provides several accounts of what actually happened to Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu.

DOCUMENT 27

Memorandum of Conference with the President,
November 2, 1963, 4:30 PM

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Meetings and Memoranda series, box 317, folder: Meetings on

Vietnam, 11/1/63-11/2/63

A follow-up meeting is held by President Kennedy in the afternoon, as recorded in this NSC staff record. Director McCone of the CIA argues that Washington lacks any "direct evidence" that Diem and Nhu are, in fact, dead. There is discussion of resuming U.S. military aid programs that had been suspended in the last weeks of the Diem regime. Note that Kennedy's appointments schedule for this date indicates the meeting took slightly more than one hour. The discussion as noted in this document cannot have consumed that amount of time.

DOCUMENT 28

CIA, *"Press Version of How Diem and Nhu Died"* (OCI 3213/63), November 12, 1963

SOURCE: JFKL: JFKP: National Security File: Country File, box 203, folder: Vietnam: General, Memos and Miscellaneous 11/6/63-11/15/63

This document comments on what is known about the deaths of Diem and Nhu and raises questions about some of the details that have appeared in the press. The CIA shows (Paragraph 7) that it still does not have an authoritative version of the deaths even almost two weeks after the coup. Its best judgment is, however, close to the truth (for the most authoritative account of the killings see Nguyen Ngoc Huy, "Ngo Dinh Diem's Execution," *Worldview Magazine*, November 1976, pp. 39-42).

DOCUMENT 29

Department of State, Memorandum William P. Bundy-Bill Moyers, *"Discussions Concerning the Diem Regime in August-October 1963,"* July 30, 1966

SOURCE: Lyndon B. Johnson Library: Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File Vietnam, box 263, folder: Hilsman, Roger (Diem 1963)

At the request of President Johnson's press secretary, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William P. Bundy sets to paper a retrospective view of

the Kennedy administration's decisions regarding policy toward Diem, the forcing out of Nhu, and how support for the South Vietnamese coup developed at top levels in Washington.

Notes

1. For a general overview see Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*. New York: Viking, 1983.
2. See Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian*. New York: Macmillan, 1963; also Anthony T. Bouscaren, *The Last of the Mandarins: Diem of Vietnam*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965. A recent reinterpretation that frames Diem as a misunderstood reformist is in Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002.
3. John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 105-108.
4. See, in general, Pierro Gheddo, *The Cross and the Bo Tree: Catholics and Buddhists in Vietnam*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970.
5. American eyewitness reports on these events can be found in Malcolm Browne, *The New Face of War*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968; and David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era*. New York: Knopf, 1964. An important recent reconstruction of these events through the eyes of American journalists can be found in William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War: Young War Correspondents and the Early Vietnam Battles*. New York: Random House, 1995. For the CIA intelligence reporting see Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968*. Langley (VA): CIA History Staff/Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998 (the last-named source is available in the National Security Archive's Vietnam Document Collection).

6. Prados, *Lost Crusader*, pp. 113-115.

7. Specific studies of the coup against Diem include Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987; and, more recently, Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

8. United States Congress, Senate (94th Congress, 1st Session). *Select Committee to Study Governmental Activities with Respect to Intelligence, Interim Report: Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975.

9. Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. New York: Times Books, 1995, p. 83.

10. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. Greenwich(CT): Fawcett Books, 1967, p. 909-910.

11. Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation*, op. cit., p.426.

12. *Alleged Assassination Plots*, pp. 5, 223.

[home](#) | [about](#) | [documents](#) | [news](#) | [postings](#) | [FOIA](#) | [research](#) | [internships](#) | [search](#) | [donate](#) | [mailing_list](#)

Contents of this website Copyright 1995-2017 National Security Archive. All rights reserved. [Terms and conditions](#) for use of materials found on this website.